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Feeling All of 45, Going on 15

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FEELING

Thanks to determined students who have refused, over and over, to give up, WPLS-FM — 95.9 on your dial — is still playing all the hits (and more) for you . . . wherever you may be.



Music posters and ads adorn the station's walls these days. Opposite: A scene from the cramped quarters of the station's early years. Color photos by Jeremy Fleming.

ALL OF 45, GOING ON 15

As a noncommercial educational radio station, Furman's WPLS isn't allowed to accept advertising money. Which is too bad, because after 44 years it could show a certain drum-wielding, battery-hawking bunny a thing or two about going, and going, and going. . . .

There have been budget crises, equipment failures and name changes. Outages have lasted from a few minutes to a few hours to a few days to an entire school year. The station's 100-watt FM signal with a 13-mile range started as a feeble AM signal traveling through underground cables, often barely strong enough to be heard in individual rooms. Today's spacious digs on the second floor of the University Center stand in sharp contrast to the original headquarters — a room so small it was impossible to fit more than two people at a time.

But one thing that hasn't changed is that since the mid-1960s, there has always been a station, because there have always been students willing to do what needed to be done. That's the legacy the volunteers, from the original six to the current co-managers who are overseeing a renaissance in WPLS' popularity, have built.

Tradition is what Furman radio has been all about — and likely will continue to be all about as long as there's a Furman.

"Every time in the station's existence that we were getting ready to make a big change or something, all of that impetus has come from students — student managers willing to badger you to death until you got on their page," says student life coordinator Carol Daniels, who has worked with the station since the 1970s. "There have always been students at Furman that love the radio. I don't know why. I really don't."

For students who believed in keeping the music playing, though, it's no mystery.

"The station provided a place for those who didn't exactly fit the typical mold, the standard image of a Furman student," says William Marion, a 1994 graduate and former station manager who credits WPLS with being the only thing that kept him from transferring. "It became its own fraternity or sorority. It was a positive place for a lot of people to go and feel that they weren't completely out of the norm, I guess."



"I got the feeling the administration was skeptical at first, didn't know what our motives were, didn't know if we were legitimate or some radical political force or what we were trying to do."





THE PIONEERING DAYS

Forty-five years ago, Jeff Holmes '66, Joe Carey '67 and Vaden "Mac" McMillin '68 had a revelation: Furman's buttoned-up young campus needed a radio station to liven it up. And how did they stumble upon this revelation? While trying to liven up Furman's buttoned-up young campus.

"I think it was sort of a discussion at that time over mead, which they now call beer," Holmes says with a chuckle.

McMillin, an electronics whiz who had built a working AM station from scratch while in high school, brought his love of radio — and his station — to Furman in the fall of 1964. He quickly found listeners in the men's residence halls, as well as like-minded students willing to work to establish an "official" station.

Six people apparently deserve most of the credit for doing the initial lifting: McMillin, Holmes, Carey, Chris Lemley '68, Morris Jeffries (who transferred after one year) and Bob Carr '67. McMillin volunteered to handle the technical details while the others worked to convince the administration to take the idea seriously.

Holmes remembers pillaging his native Florida for any used equipment he could find, while trying to rally students (and student leaders) to support the cause. The pioneers felt they needed all the support they could get so that dean of students Ernest Harrill would come on board.

"That took some real doing," says Holmes, who would be the first station manager.

"In today's world it would just be, oh, sure, anything to help these kids, but at that time it was extremely difficult because it was a matter of who was going to control the

content of what was going to be played. Back then we were still heavily influenced by the South Carolina Baptists and the social mores of the time, the generation gaps that existed between the students and faculty, all sorts of things."

McMillin adds, "I don't really know what went on behind the scenes, but I got the feeling the administration was sort of skeptical at first, didn't know what our motives were, didn't know if we were legitimate or some radical political force or what we were trying to do."

As has been the case repeatedly throughout the station's history, however, the students didn't give up, and on December 12, 1965, at high noon, WFBN, as it was first known, hit the airwaves. The voice of Milton Bagby '69 was the first on air, and he jumped in with both feet by playing The Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." This on the heels of an electrical surge during initial testing that blew out the campus clocks and caused students to be late to classes.

Radio at Furman was off to a rousing start.

"I'm sure they decided after we went on the air that they had made an egregious mistake," Holmes says. "I remember Dean Harrill was about to pull his hair out — what he had left."

But Furman had already concluded that, despite certain reservations, radio was something its students needed.

"As a student, you never really knew where the administration was from one minute to the next," Holmes recalls. "You always had your doubts. They stood behind us, though. They weren't real happy about some of the music that was played, but they stood behind us."

That support would prove to be unwavering — and critical.





UPGRADES AND UPEAVALS

Fast forward to the mid-1970s. The hall telephone buzzer system was being phased out and replaced by phones in student rooms — which spelled the beginning of the end for the radio station's carrier current signal, because once BellSouth ran its lines, problems became apparent.

"They put their cables alongside ours and put their switching boxes next to ours," Gary James '78 says. "Our signal started bleeding over into their telephone signal."

It appeared that without an over-the-air signal, the station now called WFRN was doomed.

One good thing about an over-the-air signal would be that the music would no longer stop when it rained, as often happened when water seeped into the dirt around the underground cables. But moving to above-ground transmission also required jumping through government hoops — and acquiring expensive equipment.

The station needed Furman's name on an FCC license. It also needed an antenna and an FM signal. None of which would matter, of course, if funding weren't available.

Early results weren't promising. "When we went to the administration and asked for help in going to FM, one of the things we found out was that they didn't know we had a station," James says.

Still, once he became aware of the problem, president John E. Johns came through with \$5,300 for construction of a tower (eventually placed atop the Plyler Hall cupola), plus a \$2,300 operating budget. In 1979 the station was granted its FCC license as a 10-watt educational FM station with new call letters: WPLS.

But there were still problems. For one, Plyler Hall wasn't an ideal spot for the antenna.

"That's not quite a high enough location," Carol Daniels says. "The trees interfered. We were never able to get over Paris Mountain." Or even, for many years, to some corners of the campus.

Enter William Marion in 1990. After becoming station manager, Marion determined that to take WPLS "more toward what real radio is like," the antenna needed to be relocated.

In 1992 the station received permission to move its antenna to the highest point on campus — a light pole at Paladin Stadium. But it took nearly four more years to secure the money and complete the process.

Mission accomplished? Not quite.

"Turns out the ticket office of the stadium is a lightning magnet, and so every thunderstorm we had took the station down," Daniels says. "In the meantime, we were always sending the transmitter away to be repaired. Nobody saw it coming, and nobody could diagnose the problem."

The issue reached critical mass at around the time WPLS was being forced to grow again, or die. In 2000 the FCC had decided to phase out 10-watt licenses, and the station needed to change to 100 watts. Furman approved the plan — and provided the \$10,000 necessary — for the conversion that began in 2002.





But instead of ushering in a golden age of Furman radio, WPLS would soon face perhaps its darkest hour.

Multiple equipment failures forced the station off the air for the entire 2008-09 school year, though it continued to broadcast on the Internet. When the signal was finally restored, current co-manager Maia Pujara '10 says on-campus awareness was at an all-time low.

"With the station being down for a while, interest went down," she says. "Especially with DJs coming in to do their show, it was kind of like, what's the point? We didn't have any airwaves to do it over. We just had on-line streaming."

She and co-manager Ryan Devens '10 had their work cut out for them. You get one guess on how things have turned out.

BACK FROM THE BRINK, AGAIN

Visit the WPLS office in the University Center today and you see what appears to be a perfect college radio setting.

Posters of bands virtually unknown to anyone over 25 adorn the walls. CDs — though increasingly obsolete — are piled on shelves. A DJ is surrounded by equipment that was inconceivable four decades ago. Pujara and Devens talk to a reporter over a bag of cookies, justifiably proud of bringing the station back to life.

An advertising blitz this year doubled the number of student volunteers, to about 40. And the Internet audience continues to grow with the help of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Pujara and Devens believe they've left a strong foundation for the future. "Now that it's up and running, we've gotten people to see it as kind of a cool thing again," Pujara says. "The radio station has been so good up to this point, and it just doesn't make sense to say it's obsolete because it has meant so many things to so many people."

Take Marion, for instance. Now living in Cambridge, Mass., where he is a principle with a radio promotion firm, he says, "In my case, I learned more in two years as a station manager than I did in all four years as a student at the university. It prepared me for the outside world, the business world.

"I think to this day, probably one of the hardest things I've had to do in the music business was firing a staff member at the radio station. Just having that experience and going through it was something that I wasn't going to learn in a classroom."

Carol Daniels admits that, over the years, she has had a harder and harder time keeping up with the endless stream of new music. But she remembers first hearing Billy Joel and Bruce Springsteen on WPLS.

She also knows how much the station has meant. "It provides a place at Furman for a group of students who would not have a place," she says. "They dream dreams that those of us sitting in offices get really afraid of, because they dream in a scale that doesn't understand limitations. And that is the joy of working with this age group."

Pujara agrees that the station provides a critical alternative. "You can come here and play your own music and meet people who also have the same music tastes," she says. "When



you come to an environment like this, you realize people aren't always what they seem."

To help keep the momentum going, Gary James has recently dedicated himself to organizing the station's alumni. He's developed a mailing list and a Facebook page and helped arrange reunions at Homecoming and other times. Today he has approximately 700 names, and he's looking for more.

"I think Furman students enjoy a challenge, and working at a radio station is not only fun, it's a challenge," he says. "For me it was a challenge just learning the coordination required to get the record to start at the time that I stopped talking, or to remember to stop talking when the lyrics started."

As for Jeff Holmes and the other original conspirators, they may be far removed from their Furman days, but the station will always be a special memory.

"It's turned out to be something that none of us really could have imagined back when we started," says Holmes, who works in the furniture business in Greensboro, N.C. "It was a labor of love and passion. It was a lark, but by golly we did it. I think that we were more surprised than anybody." [F]

To learn more about the alumni group, e-mail Gary James at furmanradio@yahoo.com. Visit <http://fwupls.wordpress.com> to listen to and learn more about the station.

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